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THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF MASONS AND TINKERS

BY A. T. SINCLAIR

MANY years ago, when I was looking up gipsies on the roads, I occasionally ran across Irish tinkers. Some of these travel about in their wagons, and camp out, and often several families together. Many people think they are gipsies, and so call them. Indeed, I have seen magazine articles describing them as such. In and near cities the tinker is usually seen alone, ready to mend tin-ware and umbrellas, and do other odd jobs of repairing. Some peddle laces and dry goods, and are prosperous, and one well-known Boston prize-fighter was a tinker. As I had heard they had a jargon, I was interested to know whether it was gipsy, and learned considerable of it from them. They generally know a few gipsy words; but their talk, I discovered, was not at all like Romany. What it was, puzzled me. During a summer spent at Scituate, Massachusetts, I learned to speak Irish from the quaint, picturesque Irish colony of some six hundred "mossers" there. They gather the Irish moss on the rocky sea-bottom when the tide is low. As early as three o'clock in the morning the women wade into the water nearly to their necks, in order to obtain it; while their husbands row off in their dories long distances for the same work. They gather it, dry and cure it, just as they did on the rocky islands and shores of their old home in the west of Ireland. Irish is the language they talk among themselves, and many speak no other tongue. It is an interesting settlement transplanted to America, and full of the tales of fairyland, chivalry, and the music and folk-lore of Erin. The tinker's jargon, I saw at once, was not Irish, but sounded like some Gaelic dialect.

Since then I have noticed in some publications statements that this tinker's talk, called "Shelta," was the language of the old Irish bards, but I was very sceptical about their truth.

Within two years two important articles were called to my attention, — one by Professor Kuno Meyer, the distinguished Irish scholar ("Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society," January, 1891, vol. 2, No. 5, p. 257); the other, by Mr. John Sampson (*ibid.* October, 1890, No. 4,

p. 204). The latter has collected from tinkers a large number of Shelta words, and shown that they are either Old-Irish or a corruption of it. Professor Meyer has conclusively proved that this Shelta is an artificial language, formed by the old bards from very old Irish, which has been handed down, and is now spoken by tinkers. On p. 265 Professor Meyer states as follows: "There is, or was, spoken within the memory of men now living, a Gaelic idiom in Ireland, called 'béarla lagair,' or 'béarla lagair na saor,' an artificial or technical cant, jargon, or gibberish used by masons and pedlers, beggars, etc." — "Judging from the few words of this idiom given, etc., this speech seems by no means a mere artificial cant, or jargon like Shelta." — "It would be of great interest and might be of considerable value if this idiom, supposing it still to be in existence, were written down by some Irish scholar before it wholly disappears."

On mentioning the subject to some old Irish masons here in Allston, I was surprised to find they could speak this language which they called "Bearla lagair na saor;" and what interested me, perhaps even more, was the fact that they had a mass of folk-tales and traditions connected with their craft and with Gobân Saor, the bard mason, who, they say, founded this talk. At first I was very incredulous, for I was well aware of the exuberance of the imaginations of many of the Celtic race; but I found that over a dozen of these masons, unacquainted with each other and questioned independently, all told exactly the same stories and full details. In addition to this, a large number of other old Irishmen knew there was such a mason's talk called "Bearla lagair," and many of these same traditions and folk-tales. It is clear that such was common knowledge among large numbers in Ireland.

This mason's talk is a secret language spoken only by stone-masons, they all claim. Apprentices obtained from a master-mason first papers, second papers, and finally a third paper, called an "indenture," and an increase of wages with each paper. No apprentice was entitled to his indenture until he could speak the "Bearla lagair." They were forbidden to teach it to any one not a mason, even to a member of their own family. No stone-mason would work on any job except with members of the order. This language identified them. They also had secret signs, methods of handling their trowels, squares, and other tools, ways of pointing, and laying and smoothing mortar, which indicated a member, without a word being spoken. Meetings were held, from which strangers were excluded by posted sentinels. Any member who had broken a rule of the craft could be tried and punished. Some of these rules were designed to protect the health; and the tradition is, that in olden times masons had the right to, and did, punish occasionally with the death penalty. They were a powerful order, and at that time contained a large class of the most intelligent men of the time. The mason's trade was perhaps the most important craft.

When the ancient monasteries and churches were building, these stone-masons assembled from far and wide, and with their families camped out near the work.

Sometimes they remained many years on one job. They paid no rent or taxes, and governed themselves. Their temporary habitations were not huts, but tents made of bent saplings covered with oiled cloth.

The architects then were themselves masons, who, by their talent, skill, and ability, rose to be designers of the artistic and elegant edifices now seen in ruins all over Ireland. It was then, and has been ever since, an inherited trade handed down, with its secrets, from father to son. The father of Gobân Saor was himself a famous mason and architect. The poet-mason surpassed even the father in skill and renown, and was also a famous bard. The traditions as to the time when he lived vary from before Christ to the seventh century. He is said to have travelled extensively in Ireland, England, and on the Continent, designing splendid edifices, and at times working as a common mason.

There are many homely folk-tales about him. For one Irish king he erected a palace so beautiful that the king determined to murder him, so that he never again could build anything to equal or surpass it. Gobân Saor suspected this design, and delayed completing entirely the edifice. Upon the king's complaining, he said he required a special tool to finish certain work, and would go home and procure it. The king offered to send a messenger for the tool; but Gobân Saor objected that his wife would not deliver it to a mere messenger. Finally the king decided to, and did, send his only son, who went and told his errand to the wife. Her husband had sent him for "the crook and twist tool." She was an exceedingly bright woman, and, knowing there was no such tool, at once suspected that her husband was in trouble. But she quickly said to the son, "The tool is in a large chest in the cellar; come down and help me get it." They went down; but the chest was so high, she asked him to jump into it and take a tool she pointed out to him. Just the moment he was in, she shut down and fastened the top of the chest. Then she said, "You will stay there until your father sends my husband home," which the king did immediately when apprised of the predicament of his son.

The myth about how this wife was obtained for him by his mother is as follows: His mother had learned that there was a girl in a certain town who was remarkable not only for her beauty, but also for her accomplishments, household skill, good sense, and quick wit. She determined to secure her as a wife for her son Gobân. She did not know the girl's name, or the exact locality, so she sent Gobân to the town with a very large fine sheepskin, and directed him to sell it and to bring back the price, and the skin with it. The son again and again visited the town, and tried shop after shop; but everybody laughed at him, and said he

was a foolish youth to expect the price and the skin also. Finally one day, after poor Gobân was completely discouraged, he called at a house where he found a lovely maiden pulling the wool from sheepskins with her servants. Gobân was a handsome young man; and she smiled on him, and said, "Come back here at six o'clock, when we are done work, and I will accept your terms and give you your price and also the skin to take home with you." He gladly appeared at the appointed hour, and the maiden took the skin and gave it to her servants. While she for twenty minutes delighted him with her smiles, wit, and entertaining conversation, the servants had pulled all the wool from the skin. Then she turned to him, and said, "Here is your price, and here is your skin. Take them both home with you." His mother at once realized that the girl she wished was discovered. The happy pair were soon after married, and on many occasions her quick wit and sound sense were most valuable to her husband, as in the case of the wicked king.

Sometimes a love of adventure led the Gobân Saor to wander incognito as a common workman. His renown as an architect and artistic sculptor was widespread. One simple story which amuses these workmen is this. The Gobân Saor once, in a foreign land, applied to the master-builder of a cathedral for work. "What can you do?" asked the master. "Try me and see," was the laconic reply. Then the builder placed him in a work-shed alone by himself, and, pointing to a block of stone, said facetiously, "Carve from that a cat with two tails." The shed was fastened at night, and the next morning Gobân had disappeared. When the master unfastened the shed and looked in, he found that the block of stone had been most beautifully carved into a cat with two tails. With an exclamation of surprise, he ejaculated, "It was the Gobân Saor himself! No other human being could do such superb work, or so quickly."

The Gobân Saor is one of the famous mythical Irish heroes. Sometimes he is styled the Vulcan of Irish mythology in books; but the masons claim him as *their* hero, and he is so spoken of and considered by the Irish peasantry. The shrewdness of the mother seems to have been inherited by his daughter. To her, tradition ascribes the invention of the use of a line to build a wall straight. Before, they were laid by the eye. Her father was one day teaching a son how to do this, and correcting him. She was knitting, and, passing him a long strand of yarn, said, "Give him the line, father." Such little incidents related by masons, although not particularly interesting perhaps in themselves, illustrate the regard and reputation in which the great bard-mason, the founder of Bearla lagair, is still held.

It is said by them that at one time during the Middle Ages the Irish masons were the most skilful artisans in Europe, and in large numbers went to England and the Continent, where their services were eagerly

accepted. They were welcomed everywhere by other masons, as the whole craft were bound to assist one another. Common signs and secrets enabled all to recognize one another. They also say that the early Irish monks who Christianized Germany, etc., took with them Irish architects and masons to erect monasteries and churches. Some assert that the masons in England, Scotland, and parts of the Continent understood some of this secret language. It is a fact that some stone-masons in Germany thirty years ago had a secret trade-talk, and in Belgium a tinker class have a jargon which some have supposed may be Shelta. Professor Ernst Windisch of the University of Leipzig, in the "*Gaelic Journal*," vol. i, p. 165, tells us that Irish missionaries "swarmed" into Gaul, the Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland, and northern Italy, from the sixth to the tenth centuries.

It must be borne in mind that I am simply giving traditions as told me by a large number of men independently, some of whom could not read or write; and all agreeing. I am not vouching for the real facts. It is noticeable, however, that many of these traditions are confirmed by historical records, as that masons camped out with their families, and assembled from long distances in some large work, etc. We also see now in existence ruins of the old round towers and other buildings, in which the mortar is still so hard that it cannot be picked. The secret is now lost; but the tradition is, the mortar was left in clay pits for a year or more, and was mixed with blood. John's Court is a long, low old ruin with one hundred windows, never roofed in, so called, the story runs, because the owner would employ only masons named John. One day the blood to mix with the mortar gave out, and they asked him for more. When he brutally told them to kill a peasant and use his blood, they, in a rage, killed him, and the building was left as it was, unfinished.

The men here who speak this mason's talk best are old men. A few of middle age know some of it. But all are stone-masons who learned their trade in Ireland. Irish stone-masons who learned the craft in America never speak it, and many never heard there is such a talk. Many people do not notice such things. Within a year I have been told of several small gangs who talked the Bearla lagair every day among themselves on large jobs,—one in Bangor, Maine, also others in Belmont, Auburndale, Providence, etc.

The masons are an intelligent class of men, agreeable to meet when not busy; but the itinerant tinker is generally a different character. In Ireland they bear a hard reputation, as quarrelsome, hard drinkers, and given to every kind of deception and low trick. A woman with a sick baby appears at some respectable farmhouse and begs to be taken in for the night. As soon as all are asleep, she gets up and opens the door, and the house is filled with the whole ragged and perhaps drunken band. Sometimes even the poor farmer and family are practically driven out

for the night. The first tinker I met refused to tell me one word of Shelta until a light luncheon in a saloon loosed his tongue. Even then he would not talk until he had asked the saloon-keeper if it was safe to talk with me. Some of the better class, however, who sell laces and dry goods, are prosperous and more agreeable.

All over Ireland they wander about with their wives and children, camping out. They mend tin, iron, copper ware, and crockery with wires and cement, and cast copper, iron, and brass articles, such as flatirons, iron pots and kettles, socks, and sole plates for ploughs, more durable than others, little brass ornaments, etc. Secrets of trade have been handed down. They use a black substance, perhaps bone charcoal, which makes a very hot fire, and fuse a new leg on a cast-iron pot. Tools such as mason's chisels they sharpen by sprinkling on them a kind of sand, which makes a very durable cutting-edge. Masons have told me this secret was by tradition the same as that used in olden times to sharpen bronze swords, etc., and that these tinkers are the descendants of the old Irish metal-workers, who made the elegant old Irish objects of various metals.

Another of their trades is dealing in horses; and they understand all the arts of fixing horses up to show spirit, and pass off worthless animals as good on the unwary. Sometimes several hundred assemble at fairs, and the inevitable drunkenness and fighting ensue. Dr. Thomas Wilson¹ states, "The Archæological Museum in Dublin is probably the richest in gold objects of any in Europe" (bracelets, collars, brooches, etc.). "In prehistoric times as well as early Christian times, the metal-workers of Ireland were of a high order, and possessed of a degree of skill greater, probably, than any in Europe at the same period. The display in the Museum of Science and Art in Dublin, of gold, silver, and bronze work, dating earlier than the eleventh century, will demonstrate the truth of this proposition" (p. 541). "The most elaborate, as well as the most beautiful instruments of music belonging to prehistoric times were the bronze and gold trumpets or horns of Scandinavia" (p. 527). Some were eight feet in length, with bell mouths ten inches in diameter, and most elegantly engraved with elaborate figures, men, animals, birds, etc. Many similar bronze horns (indeed, nearly all of those found in the British Isles) have been discovered in Irish bogs. It was a debatable question whether these were of Irish or Scandinavian make. An article on "The Main Features of the Advance in the Study of Danish Archæology," by W. Dreyer,² indicates that these Danish gold horns (*Luhrs*) were of Celtic design, like many other objects found in Denmark.

The fact that these tinkers of to-day speak a language as old as these

¹ "Prehistoric Art," *Annual Report Smithsonian Institution*, 1896, p. 505.

² *American Anthropologist*, 1908, pp. 526, etc.

famous jewellers and metal-workers tends to confirm the tradition that they are their descendants, retaining some of the old trade secrets.

The hedge schoolmasters, some horse-trainers, the professional match-makers, sieve-makers, hacklers, bag-pipers, story-tellers, itinerant knife-grinders, and other classes who always have wandered about in Ireland, living largely upon the well-known hospitality and open houses of the Irish farmers, often speak the mason's talk. Among these, the above traditions about masons and tinkers are current, and other people know of them. Some of these hedge-schoolmasters were learned men. They passed from town to town, teaching under the hedges such scholars as came to them. Owen O'Sullivan the Red was one, who lived over a century ago. He was celebrated also as a poet, and one story told of him illustrates his erudition. An Irish gentleman was visiting a family in England. Over a bottle of port after dinner one day the two fathers were boasting of the learning of their children. A bet was made as to which family was the more highly educated. The English children wrote sentences in several different languages, which were sent to the Irish family, who could not read them all, but left them in despair on the dinner-table. O'Sullivan, *incognito*, was then working on their farm, and, passing through the dining-room, casually took up the paper and looked at it. A daughter, happening to observe this, told her mother she thought he could read it. He was called in, and did read it all, and then wrote the answers and other questions in many languages, one of which was the Bearla lagair. The English children could not read the mason's talk, so the Irish family won. That O'Sullivan was a master of the Bearla lagair is the common report.

As before stated, Professor Meyer and Mr. Sampson have abundantly shown that Shelta, the tinker's jargon, is mostly an artificial language formed from very old Irish. Some of it is back slang; also syllables are prefixed, added, inserted in a word, and various other artifices are resorted to. The Bearla lagair, or mason's talk, is plainly founded on the same Old-Irish, but has a very large number of its words not disguised. The number of words for one thing is often very large. My conclusion is that both *talks* are the same, except that the masons use a very much larger proportion of undisguised Old-Irish words in their ordinary conversation. In this view I am confirmed by a nice, well-educated, old Irish gentleman, Mr. Jeremiah Shaw of Allston, who all his life has been deeply interested in Irish studies. He reads, writes, and speaks New-Irish perfectly, and knows Old-Irish well. From his boyhood he has collected, from hearing it, Irish folk-lore of all kinds, and has collected and copied manuscripts. He understands the Bearla lagair thoroughly. He studied it four years in Cork from two itinerant knife-grinders, Driscoll and Kearney; from a mason, Crowley; and later in Killarney during a year with a horse-trainer, O'Shea, who spoke it well. All these

spoke it exactly alike. Driscoll called the language "Shelta." Everywhere he travelled in Ireland, and this was much, he often had the opportunity of speaking the Bearla lagair, and improved it. He confirms the above traditions given me by the masons. I prepared a list of over three hundred words found in the articles of Professor Meyer and Mr. Sampson, and went over this list with those masons who know the talk best.

They knew more than nine tenths of these words, and said they had often heard them used by masons. They pronounced many of them slightly different from the way I read them, but perhaps no more so than would be expected, considering that I could not be quite sure of Mr. Sampson's manner of speaking them, and the inevitable uncertainties in taking down any such tongue. They always insisted on their own pronunciation, and would not vary it to suit my list, but they very frequently gave me several other words for the same things. The various disguises of the words they spoke of themselves, and said masons did the same even with New-Irish words to conceal them. All these artifices were well known to them; but they asserted that the masons do not use so many perverted words, but rather archaic words handed down, which have dropped out of New-Irish. Mr. Shaw confirmed all these statements, and generally volunteered the same without any hints from myself. Great care was always taken not to suggest anything, or lead any of these informants. Mr. Shaw's view is that some of these words are older than the oldest known Irish; and he states which these are, and his reasons. Some words are made up of several Old-Irish roots put together.

A few words of mason's talk must suffice here. In selecting these, I have largely desired to give words common to Shelta, in order to show the similarity of the two.

The following phonetic system of pronunciation has been employed:—

Consonants.

The consonants are pronounced as in English, except *kh*, which has a guttural sound like that in German *nach* or Scotch *loch*.

Vowels.

â, like *aw* in *parw*.

ă, like *a* in *hat*.

ĕ, like *a* in *fate*.

ě, like *e* in *pet*.

ī, like *ee* in *meet*.

ī, like *i* in *pit*.

ō, like *o* in *nose*.

ô, like *o* in *not*.

ū, like *u* in *rule*.

u, like *u* in *put*.

ũ, like *u* in *but*.

ā, like *I*.

ōī, as in *loiter*.

Vowels without accent have an intermediate sound. The acute accent ' marks the accented syllable.

Búa, *woman*.

Dārċ, *rŭsk, eye*.

Shŭrkā, *brother*.

Shĕst, *coarse grass*.

Shĕrŭkh, *rye-grass*.

Sŭbli, *a walker, an itinerant mason, any person always moving as a boy*

Mĭshĕ, *I myself*.

Dútshĕ, <i>you yourself.</i>	Kŭrn, <i>a glass.</i>
Gâp, <i>kiss.</i>	Kûĕnig, <i>eat.</i>
Lôkh, <i>man.</i>	Dig, <i>drink empty.</i>
Ôglokh, <i>a young man (ôg, young).</i>	Ôkh, <i>horse.</i>
Glômôkh, <i>fool (glôm, yell).</i>	Mârkôkh, <i>ridér (mârk = man).</i>
Léôkh, <i>fighter.</i>	Dâv, <i>bull.</i>
Kam, <i>son.</i>	Fôshg, <i>sheep.</i>
Túki, <i>túkin, lákin, girl.</i>	Ān, <i>bread.</i>
Lāiba, <i>lôba, hit (a back-handed blow).</i>	Lôkh, <i>milk.</i>
Lûg, <i>boiled meal.</i>	Kru, <i>skin.</i>
Nôk, <i>mountain head, or top.</i>	Gâl, <i>bright, white.</i>
Fĕ, <i>meat (New-Irish, sinew, vein).</i>	Mûrûkhô, <i>dark, black.</i>
Bĭle, <i>mouth.</i>	Wĕnĕ, <i>dark green, green.</i>
Míar, <i>destroyer, bad luck, devil.</i>	Rû, <i>red.</i>
Ād, <i>two.</i>	Ār, <i>great.</i>
Chĭmân, <i>stick (Kûmân, N. I. curling-stick).</i>	Nĭ, <i>small.</i>
Shĭhûkh, <i>whiskey (a large number of other words also).</i>	Dârk, <i>knife.</i>
Vâlĕ, <i>town.</i>	Ēôlôr, <i>mortar.</i>
Râhûg, <i>râhlĭân, car=an Irish cart.</i>	Gĕûg, <i>arm.</i>
Tĕs, <i>bread.</i>	Drĭn, <i>back.</i>
Dôĭĕ, <i>a bread-trough.</i>	Pĕd, <i>leg.</i>
Lâmăřĕ, <i>slâmăřĕ, bag.</i>	Lâpĭn, <i>web-foot, shoe.</i>
Lâmpil, <i>any receptacle for the hand (pil, hole).</i>	Brât, <i>coat.</i>
Khûâkh, <i>kŭrn, mâkhĭn, mŭrnân, píġĭn, cup.</i>	Trus, <i>trousers.</i>
Knap, <i>hunchback = the Shelta word nŭp.</i>	Knu, <i>finger-nail.</i>
Tûlŭp, <i>belly.</i>	Gârĭôir, <i>cutler.</i>
Lima, <i>milk.</i>	Ānĕ, <i>circle, wheel.</i>
Grĕ, <i>rise.</i>	Kârtŭb, <i>cart.</i>
Grĕûg, <i>hurry up.</i>	Ô, <i>song, poem.</i>
Mâlya, <i>clinched hand.</i>	Kyârlan, <i>music.</i>
Dŭd, <i>hand.</i>	Shin, <i>sing. (I have heard tinkers say, 'Shina Shelta?' = "Talk Shelta?")</i>
Smĭr, <i>mĭrk, bone.</i>	Skrŭgal, <i>throat.</i>
Āmŭrk, <i>marrow.</i>	Lŭiv, <i>grass.</i>
Dâřĕ, <i>say.</i>	Ārŭ, <i>a horn of any kind.</i>
Thôber, <i>road.</i>	Kruh, <i>harp.</i>
Dĕshĕ, <i>yes.</i>	Lômara, <i>wool.</i>
Nĭdĕsh, <i>no.</i>	Kôřa, <i>priest.</i>
Mânărŭn, <i>room.</i>	Rĕhâilâkh, <i>stopping-place (rĕ, stop; hâil, home; âkh, idea of stopping).</i>
Mânôřĭn, <i>a middle room.</i>	Nâkht, <i>night (German Nacht).</i>
Rĭstan, <i>prison.</i>	Lŭndra, <i>a bright light, sun.</i>
Gâhĭr, <i>father.</i>	Rĕ, <i>moon.</i>
Ēsht, <i>ear, listen.</i>	Ān, <i>sword.</i>
Kôb, <i>lip, mouth.</i>	Bini, <i>talk, melodious.</i>
Dĕd, <i>tooth.</i>	Ŭn twĕdĕ dŭt na bĭni? = <i>do you speak Mason's talk?</i>
Bôs, <i>fiŕ, hand.</i>	Mĭnkŭr, <i>low people, "small-fry" (mĭn, small, fine; kŭr, rubbish).</i>
Krub, <i>clowen hoof, foot.</i>	
Dli, <i>locks, hair.</i>	
As, <i>the noise of falling water, water.</i>	

A folk-lore legend gives some points which bear upon the age when Gobân Saor lived, and indicate an original identity between the languages of metal-workers and that of the masons. The story is weird and ghastly, but characteristic of the times, and of many Old-Irish myths.

The manuscript from which the translation is made was copied forty years ago, from an old manuscript, and the language is that of centuries ago. I cannot learn that it has ever been published.

Forthaid Caille, a well-known king, and a noted warrior of the third century, is supposed to address the wife of Ailille MacEagain, with whom he had a tryst. He had eloped with her. The injured husband had challenged him to battle, and both had fallen in the combat at Feic-a-pool, in the Boyne near Slane. Faithful to his promise made before the battle, Forthaid, or rather his spirit, met and thus addressed her: —

“Woman, do not speak to me. Not with thee is my mind. My mind is still upon the slaughter at Feic. My blood-stained corpse lies by the side of Leitlir da M’buch. My unwashed head among the Fianna amid the fierce slaughter. It is folly for one making a tryst not to consider the tryst of death. My last resting-place had been marked out at Feic. My destiny was to fall by foreign warriors.” Forthaid directed her not to await the terror of night on the field among the slain, but to return to her house, taking with her his arms, his crimson tunic, his white shirt, his silver belt, his shield with the bronze rim, by which they used to swear true oaths. She would find them all on the battlefield. In the course of his address Forthaid mentions the four-cornered casket made in the time of King Art by Turke the father of Gobán Saor out of a bar of gold which Dinole the Smith had brought across the sea. Many battles he said had been fought by the “King of Rome in Latium to obtain possession of it. It was revealed to Find after a drinking bout.” Finally he enjoined upon the woman to raise a conspicuous tomb to him, as it would be visited by many.

It is worthy of note that this was in the third century, and the father of Gobán Saor depicted as a worker in gold. Another folk-tale of a more cheerful character is a new version of the Mermaid myth. This also is from a manuscript.

They entered a passage and saw before them, seated on a rock, a woman adjusting her tresses. As soon as she saw them, she was alarmed, and quick as lightning disappeared in the sea. In her haste she forgot her mantle, and Donald instantly seized it and held it in his grasp. “That was the mermaid, or sea nymph about whom we have heard so much,” said Donald, “but this is the first time I have ever laid my eyes upon her: although I have been to sea, early and late.” Scarcely had he spoken these words and while they were yet beneath the cliff, when the woman returned and demanded her cloak. With this request Donald refused to comply, and the mermaid threatened to send a mighty wave against the cliff that would overwhelm them, and sweep them into the ocean. This threat did not in the least daunt Donald, for he had often heard that a mermaid had no more power after she had parted with her mantle. When the men reached the road she was still following them, and imploring Donald to return the garment, but her cries and supplications did not in the least weaken his resolve to retain it, and he folded it inside his outer cloak. The woman’s great distress moved the other men to pity, — pity perhaps not unmingled with fear. Old Donough acted as spokesman and remonstrated with Donald. “It is not lucky for you, Donald,” said he, “to keep such a strange thing, and it is not safe or wise for you to bring it into your house, and the mermaid, the poor thing, will drop dead if you keep that mantle.” —

"Luck or ill luck," replied Donald, "I will not part with the mantle: and as soon as I reach home I will lock it in a trunk." The men were grieved at Donald's strange behavior, but save an exchange of ominous looks they did not venture any further persuasions. When the mermaid understood that there was no prospect of obtaining her garment she regained her composure, and followed Donald meekly to his house, where henceforth she took up her abode. Donald was at this time thirty years of age, and though there were hundreds of good-looking young women of his acquaintance he was yet a bachelor. For a man in his station in life he was the richest man in the barony. As already stated, the mermaid made Donald's home her abode, and there was not in his household any maid so skilful, so deft, or so zealous in the discharge of her duties. She was a beautiful woman and Donald became enamored with her when first he saw her seated on the rock beneath the cliff. The attachment of Donald for the mermaid was discussed far and near, and many predicted the mermaid would take Donald to Tímanóg, as Niad had taken Ossian a thousand years before. Donald and the mermaid were married, and there was not in all Kerry a more lovable couple than they. Nor had he any reason to regret his choice, for the mermaid was a good wife and an exemplary mother, and time only enhanced her in his esteem. They had now been married over thirty years, and were blessed with a large, grown up family. The daughters were like the mother, remarkably handsome, and there was not living at that time any woman who approached them for beauty. The sons were tall and stalwart, as they inherited their father's passion for the sea. They were leaders in every manly exercise, and there were not in all Ireland more skilled and fearless seamen. The sons and daughters were a credit to their parents and their happy home was the rendezvous of scholars, bards, poets, and musicians. Everything prospered with this worthy family, and with wealth came the desire for social distinction. To satisfy this desire they purchased a fine residence in the capital city of the province. All arrangements having been completed, the moving day arrived, and moving then was even a more formidable task than now, for the vans of over two hundred years ago were rather primitive and the ideal roads of to-day were then unknown. The family were seated in their coaches ready for the journey when the mother alighted from her coach and returned to the house presumably for something she had forgotten, or perhaps to take a look at the interior of a home in which she had lived so many years and where she had spent the happy days of her youth, where her children had been born, and where she had resided until she arrived at a serene and contented old age. On passing through one of the now almost empty rooms — empty of everything worth moving — she noticed that a large trunk containing miscellaneous old articles had fallen to pieces and the contents were scattered broadcast over the floor. She stooped and picked up what appeared to be an old dust-covered, well-worn garment. And no sooner did she grasp it than she laughed so loudly that her laugh was heard all over the village. If Donald had forgotten the magic mantle, not so had the mermaid. In an instant she regained her former youth and beauty. She no longer cared for husband and children, and swifter than the velocity of March winds she returned joyfully to her beloved Tímanóg on the blue rim of the Western Ocean.

This charming folk-tale was told and taken down forty years ago in New-Irish from the lips of a hedge-schoolmaster, a story-teller who

knew Bearla lagair, in an ancient house on a large farm of five hundred acres, half-way between Cork and Killarney. It illustrates well the character of the myths which always have fascinated the Irish common people. Many of these story-tellers not only inherited the legends, but also the language of the old bards, who mystified the peasantry by their artificial learning, and retained it, as do the masons, as a secret tongue.

All the traditions, folk-tales, customs, habits, and other material given in this paper, unless otherwise stated, have been gathered by myself from a very large number of Irish people, mostly in Boston and its vicinity. I have devoted much time to the investigation. Only a brief reference has been made to my large collections of words, phrases, and other matters in regard to the masons' and tinkers' languages. I know of no publications treating on the subject of Shelta except those of Meyer and Sampson above mentioned, and some by Leland; and I have simply attempted to compare my own material with these.

I have found nothing about Bearla lagair except the few lines of Meyer and two or three brief references, stating that there was such a jargon, and giving a few words.

Two things have particularly impressed me in investigating this subject. One is that such an ancient language is still spoken in America, and few have even suspected it; the other is that here is a rich mine of new, unpublished folk-tales, romantic, chivalric, beautiful, and fascinating, easily worked and studied.

Some words used by Shakespeare, and marked in the Century Dictionary as "origin unknown," are found in Shelta, or mason's talk. Leland remarks, "Shakespeare, who knew everything, makes Prince Hal declare that he could drink with a tinker in his own language."¹ An unpublished Irish manuscript which I have seen contains "An Old Bard's Advice to his Son," which is singularly like "Polonius' advice to his son Laertes" (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3). The former has all the ideas of the latter, and many additional, and the language is older than Shakespeare's time. It is impossible now to do more than throw out these hints; but these studies are most interesting to the English scholar as well as to the student of folk-lore.

¹ *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, New Series, July, 1907, vol. i, No. 1, p. 74.